Transcription of ArchivingAK, Federal Lands 3: Commonwealth North records

Transcription completed by OpenVIVO Whisper Transcription in Audacity and edited by Becky Butler Gallegos

[Theme music]

Becky Butler Gallegos: Welcome to ArchivingAK, a podcast of the Archives and Special Collections at the UAA/APU Consortium Library in Anchorage, Alaska. We're here to talk about what we do, what our researchers are up to, and to give you a closer look at the world of archives. My name is Becky Butler Gallegos. I'm one of the archivists here. I'm joined today by Archives Technician Luna de la Rosa. Hi Luna, how are you?

Luna De La Rosa: I am doing swell.

B: Wonderful. Luna's joining me today to continue discussing the collections we're working on through the Alaska Federal Lands Project. If you've never heard of that before, check our show notes for a link to our blog post about the project, and there was also a previous podcast episode you can listen to. Essentially, we're working to increase digital awareness and access to our collections that relate to federal lands. Today, we're looking at the records of Commonwealth North. Commonwealth North was co-founded in 1979 by two former governors of Alaska, Walter J. Hickel and William Egan. It acts as a non-partisan group funded by individual memberships and private sector funds. According to its website, Commonwealth North's purpose is to educate its members and others on significant public policy issues affecting Alaska and its future, and to assist in their resolution. Commonwealth North holds monthly forums with speakers from a variety of disciplines to provide insight into Alaskan matters. In addition, it forms study groups to research Alaskan issues and publish their findings and recommendations. The Archives has the historical administrative records of this organization, as well as many, many recordings of Commonwealth North events and Board of Directors meetings. You can find the description of the collection on the Archives’ website. So Luna, can you tell us a little bit more about what your work on the collection has looked like so far?

L: Right, so I've done two main things with this collection. The first was to pull out all of the VHS tapes and send them out to a third-party vendor who digitizes those. And that process really is just identifying which VHS tapes you want to send. Obviously, we don't need to do any of the duplicates so those can stay. And making sure we leave some sort of note for any other archivists that might be looking for them, letting them know that they have been sent out.

B: Yes, that's essential. It gives you a panic attack if you go to look for something and it's just gone.

L: The second thing I've done with this collection is digitize the audio cassette tapes which we do do in-house. I have a tape recorder in my office that is connected to my computer which then records on Audacity which is just the program we use for this. And then gets moved into the Archives’ digital preservation space for posterity.

B: Have there been any issues you've run into as you've digitized?

L: So, yes. There are various issues that can go wrong while you're recording the tapes. The first thing is just making sure that Audacity is in the correct settings to record the tape because if it records and you haven't- if you just haven't chosen the right audio setup, then sometimes you'll record the whole thing only to realize it's not playable.

B: Oh, that's rough.

L: It is. It's very frustrating when that happens. You also, as you are recording these tapes, you don't actually know how good of a shape they're in. And so there are things that happen where you think it's a perfectly good tape and then either you see sound waves only to find out later that those sound waves were really only picking up staticky, gargly noises.

B: Eee...

L: Or the tape stops and you think, "Oh, it must be done." There's a little clicky sound that you hear that tells you that the tape is done. And sometimes you hear that and you think, "Oh, it must be done recording." But then you take it out and you stop the recording and you realize, "Oh no, it's actually the tape in the cassette got stuck."

B: Oof.

L: Or like got jammed and so it stopped. But it’s actually- there's more to go and then you have to kinda figure out how many times do you want to try to fix it and try to get it to go over that and keep recording? Or do you just accept that that is as far as you're going to be able to record of this tape so that you don't risk deteriorating it further, you know?

B: Yeah, because there is that balance there, part of the reason we're trying to digitize these is that they can be in a usable format. The actual tapes are old now, they are degrading and at a certain point we can't stop that process. That's why it's so essential to be digitizing these before they are too far gone for us to actually get content off of them.

L: Right. And so I think the biggest- the biggest struggle with digitizing the tapes is the not knowing when you're going to get a bad tape. And if you just leave it and you let it run all the way through and then it turns out that you didn't get what you need and then you have to run it again. But every time you run it, it's deteriorating more. So it's kind of- you have to make the most out of the chance you get. And sometimes you could go through a string of tapes that are perfect condition, have the same amount of time, have the A side and the B side. And so you're just like going through tapes. You get too comfortable and then that's when a weird tape pops up.

B: There goes your whole morning.

L: Exactly. There goes your whole morning. And now you have to, like, stop what you're doing and figure that out. So yes, the tapes are, I don't know, they're little tricksters.

B: [laughs] Thank you for dealing with them. About how many tapes have you done?

L: So all together, the collection has 529 tapes. But with duds and duplicates, there's probably more like 400.

B: Wow, that's a lot, and we should mention a lot of these cassettes came straight from an administrative assistant who was recording meetings. Sometimes there is some human error at the point of creation where you think you hit record and you really didn't. So now you have an empty tape that's labeled like it recorded a meeting but it didn't. Or there was an issue with the audio cassette or the recording device, you know, maybe it wasn't set up to actually catch the sound. So not all of our duds are necessarily just because of degradation. They could just have arrived at the archives here. And we don't know until we get that first chance to listen to them. Speaking of which, have you found anything interesting to you while you've been digitizing?

L: So the fun thing about audio cassette tapes in general is just like being able to hear voices from the past. I think a lot of archiving and researching with archived materials- it kind of feels like you're meeting someone backwards. So, like, instead of meeting a person and then seeing their work, you typically see their work first. And then maybe you'll, like, find a picture or you'll hear a recording of their voice. But those things aren't really guaranteed. Sometimes all you have is the documents. And so the cool thing about this collection specifically is that they have so, so many different people. They had all these events. And so they got so many different, like, senators and political figures and just, like, people around Alaska, experts on things. . . And so I think that's really, I don't know, it's, like, a great resource that can help a wide range of different research projects. I also just think that currently we feel weirdly secure with how we take photos and, like, upload it up to the cloud or, like, take recordings on our phone and save it on Google. But I think people don't realize how quickly technology changes. Like as we just stated with these audio cassette tapes, like, I bet during that time, they were like, “Oh, these are going to last us forever. Now this will always be safe.” But no, actually there's all this work involved to make sure the next generation gets to hear these tapes. And technology is changing so quickly that kind of feels like if two generations drop the ball on preserving these things, then it's just gone.

B: Mm-hmm.

L: It's just gone. And all we have are maybe documents that prove that these people existed. So it is just nice to have this preserved and to, like, get- be able to have this, like, voice reveal for all these leaders in Alaska.

B: That’s wonderful. All right, so jumping back to the Alaska Federal Lands project, the primary focus of it is to make the land-related collections more digitally accessible. So, getting these tapes into a digital format will make them hugely more usable for researchers. So you all have an idea of what these tapes contain. We have tapes from briefings and forums on spruce bark beetles, subsistence rights, the seafood industry, and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, among many, many, many, many other topics. They feature familiar Alaskan names like Governor Walter Hickel, Senator then Governor Frank Murkowski, Governor Tony Knowles, and Lieutenant Governor Fran Ulmer. There are even some national guests like Hillary Clinton and Michael Powell.

L: Will these digitized tapes be available for use? Will transcripts be available?

B: That is the big question. The answer to the first part is yes. These digitized tapes are available for use right now in the research room. You can also contact the archives to request remote access online. The second question about transcripts is a little trickier to answer. Transcription by human takes a long, long time to complete. Imagine trying to listen to this podcast and write down everything we say exactly. People talk over each other frequently. Sorry, that's usually me, Luna. And sometimes words get garbled over a microphone, so it usually takes multiple listens through of a sentence to capture it accurately. So here's where it gets exciting. This is where artificial intelligence can help the archives. We've recently begun to experiment with 100% local AI transcription services. Basically, that means we're not uploading our content to a training model or to a cloud. We want to keep control of the intellectual property and copyright of the material while also getting things transcribed in a fraction of the time it usually takes. Now, AI isn't perfect, but even only having to listen to a recording once for a quality control check of an AI-generated transcript is much, much faster than relying solely on human ears and typing. We're still very much in the testing phase of what this technology could look like in the archives, but I personally find it very exciting. Transcripts make recorded materials much easier to search and they make our material more accessible to all, and I'm a big fan of both those things.

L: You can find the finding aid also known as a collection description for the Commonwealth North Records on the archives’ website. You can find a link to it in this podcast episode description. Contact the archives if you'd like to listen or view any of the digitized materials or view the paper-based records in the research room.

B: You can also find two versions of the AI transcription of this episode in the episode description. One will be simply what the program generates and the other will be edited by me for accuracy and to meet our standards. Check them out!

B: That brings us to the end of today's episode of Archiving AK. Thank you once again, Luna.

L: Thanks!

B: Stay curious out there!

B: Um, why are marsupials the best animals?

L: I don't know.

B: They have koala-ty checks.

L: [laughs]

B: Stupid.

L: Noice. [laughs]

B: Okay.